

Object and Declaration of Principles

Socialist Principles Explained

Preface

The basis of the Socialist Party of Great Britain (and of its Companion Parties in other countries) is the OBJECT and DECLARATION of PRINCIPLES: applicants for membership are required to indicate their acceptance of them. It is more than a formal declaration and applicants must show that they understand the implications of what they sign.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to provide in convenient form a brief and simple introduction to the OBJECT and each of the eight Clauses, though we would emphasise that the Declaration has to be considered as a whole. The reader of the pamphlet will notice a certain amount of repetition in the different sections. It was considered desirable to repeat some statements wherever appropriate in order to make the position quite clear.

Readers are urged to read other pamphlets in our list and the *Socialist Standard* for fuller treatment of certain questions.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE S. P. G. B.

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So that all shall know exactly what it is we stand for, and to prevent misapprehension and confusion of our clear socialist case with the spurious claims of the "Left-wing", we present this brief summary of our Object and Declaration of Principles, confident that it is well within the grasp of every worker who reads it without prejudice.

Especially do we commend it to those considering applying for membership. For them it is essential reading. A thorough understanding of the pamphlet will enable them to take their place confidently and happily as comrades in the ranks of those who work for Socialism.

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The SPGB Declaration of Principles: How they originated

In each issue of our monthly journal, *The Socialist Standard*, and in all the pamphlets, leaflets and elections addresses we publish, prominence is given to the Party's OBJECT and DECLARATION of PRINCIPLES. The Object and Principles are the basis on which the Socialist Party of Great Britain is organised. Applicants for membership are required to satisfy a Branch that they understand and accept them. They govern and explain our activities and mark us off from other organisations claiming to be socialist.

This practice of firmly linking the Party and its membership to a set form of principles—so different from the loose arrangements in other political organisations—calls for explanation. Why these particular principles? Why do we adhere to wording (adopted in 1904) that in some respects may seem old-fashioned by modern standards? Why do we not enlarge the membership by welcoming all those who are attracted by our Object or by just one or other of our eight Principles?

The answers to these questions have their origin in the history of the working class organisations and the way the Socialist Party of Great Britain came to be formed.

From late in the eighteenth century, under the pressures of capitalism, workers were continually experimenting with forms of industrial and political organisation and action. At first the workers were hitting back blindly at oppression, but later, as they learned from experience, they showed more understanding of the issues involved. Political parties were formed claiming to be socialist, each with its own ideas on policy and tactics, among them were the Social Democratic Federation, the Fabian Society, the Socialist League, and the Independent Labour Party. When the Socialist Party of Great Britain was formed in 1904 it was by men and women who, as ex members of the SDF, and students of working class history, were able to benefit from the errors and failures of other organisations. For the first time in this country, a party was formed matching up to the basic requirements of working class emancipation. The founders owed much to the unsurpassed analysis of capitalism provided by Karl Marx. In drafting the Object and Declaration of Principles of the new party they made some adaptations from earlier programmes including that of the short-lived Socialist League with which William Morris had been associated.

The original wording has been retained mainly because it is an historical statement. Even if we were to revise it with modern terminology we would not need to alter the meaning of any of the principles embodied in it. Great technological developments have taken place in methods of production, transport and communication, and there is more State capitalism (nationalisation) than there was in 1904; but the structure of capitalism has not materially changed. Nor have any useful new methods of working class action been discovered. Modern movements which falsely claim that Socialism can be achieved by reliance on leaders, by strikes and general strikes, by Labour governments and reforms, by guerrilla fighting and sabotage and so on, are only repeating the errors made by immature working class organisations in the nineteenth century, errors that were known to and rejected by the Socialist Party of Great Britain at its formation.

One of the lessons experience had taught the founders of the Party was that nothing of permanent value is achieved by building up a large membership composed of people who do not understand and accept the Object and Declaration of Principles as a whole. To do this would divert our energies to reformist, non-Socialist aims and would lead to the socialist membership losing control of the organisations—as happened in the Social Democratic Federation.

There are no short cuts to Socialism. Concentrating on the socialist objective is a slow process but there is no other way.

One thing to remember is that our Declaration is a brief statement of general principles, not a detailed guide to cover all eventualities. When its wording was being discussed, consideration was given to the possible inclusion of additional clauses but the form finally accepted was held to be sufficient. For example, it does not include a reference to war, but under its guidance the Party had no hesitation in declaring total opposition when the first world war came in 1914.

OBJECT of the Socialist Party of Great Britain

The establishment of a system of society based upon the common ownership and democratic control of the means and instruments for producing and distributing wealth by and in the interest of the whole community.

A system of society alludes to the sum total of human relationships and is meant to distinguish us from those who seek to organize co-operative colonies, islands within the sea of capitalism. Socialism is not a colony, not a kibbutz, but *a system of society* in the sense that capitalism, feudalism and chattel slavery must all be characterised as systems of society.

The term *common ownership* should not be confused with such phenomena as *state ownership*, or '*public*' *ownership*, terms used under capitalism to designate a more direct ownership of certain industries by the capitalist class as a whole. *Common ownership* implies the absence of ownership and we specify that this common ownership is to apply to the means and instruments for producing and distributing wealth. We do not speak here of one's personal belongings as some not too discerning opponents of our case delight in inferring. *Democratic control* should speak for itself but the point must be made nevertheless, that in a society wherein the means and instruments of wealth production and distribution are commonly owned it is difficult to conceive of control other than democratic.

In order to rule out all possibility of a misunderstanding it is necessary to indicate some of the consequences of establishing a Socialist system of society summarised above. Production will be solely and directly for the use of the whole population, with no buying and selling, no price system. Rent, interest and profit, and the wages system will be abolished. Production and distribution will be on the socialist principle: "From each according to ability: to each according to need". All will have free access to society's products.

There will be no class division, no working class or owning class and no trade unions: there can be no trade unions because there will be no wages to bargain over and no employers to bargain with. Socialist society can only be world-wide; humanity will not be segregated behind national frontiers or coerced by the armed forces of governments.

Presented with this statement of the socialist objective our opponents, including members of the Labour Party who claim to be socialist, reject it as unrealistic or utopian. (Members of the Labour Party may be reminded that some of their own founders, including Keir Hardie, declared that it was to achieve just such a social system that they formed the Labour Party.)

Why then do we hold that the establishment of Socialism is a necessary step forward for the human race?

Our justification is twofold. Firstly, capitalism has raised productive forces to the level making Socialism possible for the first time.

Secondly, we point to the failure of all non socialist remedies to achieve any worthwhile results. Liberal, Tory and Labour Governments in the past hundred years have gone on promising to eliminate poverty, abolish crises and unemployment and save the world from war—all within the capitalist system. We have had capitalism with free trade and protection, capitalism with the British Empire and without, capitalism outside and inside the European Economic Community, capitalism with and without inflation. And at the end of it all we see none of the basic problems solved.

Unless Socialism is established by the working class we face the indefinite repetition of all the past miseries. None of the other political parties can offer a way out.

Clause 1: the basis of capitalism

That society as at present constituted is based upon the ownership of the means of living (i.e., land, factories, railways, etc.) by the capitalist or master class, and the consequent enslavement of the working class, by whose labour alone wealth is produced.

This Principle is concerned with the position of the working class in capitalist society, and their relations with the owning class.

A society is a number of people living together having dealings or relations with each other in the everyday affairs of life. The sum total of these relations forms the *system* under which people live—the social system or system of society. There have been systems in the past based on kinship, with property held in common; on chattel slavery; and on serfdom. Now we have capitalism, the typical form of which is that the means of production and distribution are owned by a small propertied class, the capitalists, who also own the products and sell them to realise a profit. Wage or salary earners are the employees of the owning class. They, with their dependants, are the great majority of the population and constitute the working class.

A minor role in production and distribution is played by individual employers and the so-called ‘self employed’, but overwhelmingly it is the working class who perform all the tasks necessary for capitalism to function, including organisation, supply of inventions and discoveries, financial operations, administration and so on.

Unlike the slave or serf the individual wage or salary earner is ‘free’ to seek employment where he chooses, but as a class the workers are in a subject position in society, exploited to produce profit for the owning class and having to suffer unemployment, poverty and all the other hardships of their class position—they are ‘wage slaves’.

This description of the class relationships of capitalism is sometimes criticised on the ground that some workers receive larger incomes than some capitalists; that is to say, there are a few people whose income is high though not derived from the ownership of property, and some people living entirely on rent, interest or profit whose total ownership is small and their standard of living lower than that of some workers. Though this ‘overlap’ does exist it is of no importance. It does not alter the fact that a small minority of people own the bulk of the accumulated wealth and that the great majority of high-income receivers are found among the owners of large amounts of capital.

Another objection is the claim that capitalism is being gradually abolished through what is called ‘State ownership’, ‘public ownership’ or ‘nationalisation’. A closer look at this shows it to be entirely baseless. The relationship between workers and State employing bodies does not differ in any way from the relationship between worker and private employers—as witness the wage levels in the one and the other, the strikes, the closed down plants, the redundancies and unemployment. In State concerns, as in private ones, the capital belongs to the employer or employing body, the products are sold to make profit, and from the investors' point of view the only significant difference is that those who lend money to governments (used by them to finance nationalised concerns) receive guaranteed interest payments on their investment without any direct influence over the administration of the industry concerned.

From the beginning of capitalism governments have tried to solve certain of the system's problems by means of nationalisation, properly called State capitalism: it does not change the essential structure of the capitalist system.

Clause 2: the class struggle

That in society, therefore, there is an antagonism of interests, manifesting itself as a class struggle, between those who possess but do not produce, and those who produce but do not possess.

This Principle follows in logical sequence from the previous one, for the basic antagonism of interests or class struggle between the working class and the capitalist class arises from the fact that society's means of living are owned by one class to the exclusion of the rest of society. In order to live the workers have to seek employment from the owners and bargain with them over the terms and conditions of employment. In economic terms the working class are sellers of their mental and physical energies, their “labour-power”, which the employers buy for the day, week, or month; or which the employers refuse to buy when they so choose.

It is possible exceptionally for individual workers to climb into the ranks of the capitalist class (for example, winning a few hundred thousand pounds on football pools) but such elevation is quite beyond the bounds of possibility for the working class as a whole. For the great majority of workers wages and salaries are swallowed up in living costs, and no surplus is left out of which to accumulate significant amounts of money to serve as capital.

One form taken by the antagonism of interests is the ceaseless struggle over the amounts of wages, with periodical strikes by workers and lockouts by employers.

Capitalist politicians and reformist political parties such as the Labour Party deny the existence of the class struggle or else deplore it as an unnecessary manifestation of greed and selfishness which could be eliminated with a ‘change of heart’. In its long years of propaganda for nationalisation the Labour Party argued that it would cause that ‘change of heart’ to take place because the workers employed in nationalised industries would think that they were at last working for themselves and not private profit. Experience has shown this to be a vain hope, as the Socialist Party of Great Britain (which never supported the demand for nationalisation) foretold at its formation in 1904.

The employers and their agents never cease to appeal to the workers ‘to forget class’ and enter into harmonious co-operation with their employer in the interest of the company, or with the government in the interest of ‘the nation’, especially in time of war. The Labour Party and the trade unions join in such campaigns. Sometimes the appeal is successful for a time, but always the unquenchable antagonism of clashing class interests breaks up the harmony. There can be no sound basis for reconciliation between exploited and exploiting classes. This principle expresses the fact that the capitalists live on the backs of the workers.

The growing maturity of the working class will show itself eventually in a clear recognition by workers in all lands that they have a mutual interest against capitalism and for Socialism.

Clause 3: working class emancipation

That this antagonism can be abolished only by the emancipation of the working class from the domination of the master class, by the conversion into the common property of society of the means of production and distribution, and their democratic control by the whole people

.The first part of this Principle asserts that there is no way to escape from the consequences of this class division within the framework of capitalism. The Labour Party (with its camp followers, the ‘Left-wing’) is just as impotent as the Tories and Liberals to solve the problems of the working class.

It has always been the belief of the leaders of the Labour Party that, through superior insight and greater understanding of the needs of the workers they could reform capitalism and make a success of it in a way that the Tories and Liberals had never been able to do. It was a Chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party and Minister in a Labour Government Mr. (now Lord) Houghton who made the claim for the 1967 Labour Government— “never has any previous Government done so much in so short a time to make modern capitalism work” (*The Times*, 25th April 1967).

There is nothing in the catastrophic record of successive Labour Governments from 1924 onwards to the major crisis of 1975 to justify their claim that they can run capitalism more successfully than can any other government. Nor is there any reason to suppose otherwise since there is not a single policy of Tory governments that has not been followed by Labour governments at some time or other.

The second point made in this Principle is that the abolition of class antagonism requires the emancipation of the working class from the domination of the master class. With the change-over to common ownership of the means of production and distribution the division of society into an owning class and a working class will cease, and with it class antagonism.

The Clause also postulates democratic control by the whole people; no other control could be possible for socialist society. Potentially instruments already exist for exercising democratic control. Subject to reservations where democratic procedures are restricted or manipulated there is intrinsically nothing wrong with institutions where delegates assemble to parley (Parliaments, congresses, diets or even so-called soviets). What is wrong with them today is that such parliaments are controlled by the capitalist class. Remove class society and the assemblies will function in the interest of the whole people. Socialists advocate transforming the State machine from government or rule over people by a master class into an administration of things in the interest of all mankind.

Clause 4: all mankind without distinction of race or sex

That as in the order of social evolution the working class is the last class to achieve its freedom, the emancipation of the working class will involve the emancipation of all mankind without distinction of race or sex.

Capitalism has not existed for all time but is the outcome of a process of social evolution. Starting with primitive communism in which property was held in common, followed in turn by the kind of society known in Greece and Rome, based on production by chattel slave labour, and by Feudal society out of which capitalism grew. In each of the societies after primitive communism there has been exploitation by one class of another, but the form of exploitation has changed. The feudal serf was not 'owned' as the chattel slave had been, but he was tied to the land of the manorial lord and under obligation to give unpaid labour on the lord's land while free to maintain himself by his labour on land under his control.

All past social revolutions, up to and including that which made capitalism the prevailing social system, created a new exploiting class: now the capitalist class exploit the workers.

It is true that alongside these two main classes there are other groups, such as peasants and the 'self-employed', leading an often precarious existence. Once the means of production and distribution have come to be owned in common by society there cannot be any subject class to be exploited. Hence, in the words of this Clause, the emancipation of the working class will involve the emancipation of all mankind moreover "without distinction of race or sex".

The evolution of property society reaches its limit with the advent of capitalism. The establishment of Socialism and with it the end of exploitation is the beginning of a new era in the history of mankind. The working class will therefore be the last exploited class to achieve its emancipation.

Clause 5: not through leadership

That this emancipation must be the work of the working class itself.
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It is obvious that the working class, as the exploited class, have an interest in achieving emancipation, and equally obvious that capitalists as a class have no such interest, and indeed are bound to react against it even though, as Marx pointed out, it is sometimes possible for enlightened individuals in a ruling class to throw in their lot with a revolutionary movement.

The question does arise, however, whether the working class can leave the achievement of emancipation to leaders. All of the other political parties, including those calling themselves socialist, accept the principle of leadership. The disciples of Lenin, for example, subscribe to his fallacious view that Socialism can be achieved by an educated leadership, an élite composed of professional revolutionaries drawn from the 'intelligentsia', leading a mass of followers.

The Socialist Party of Great Britain and its Companion Parties in other countries wholly rejects the concept of leadership. The movement that is to be capable of achieving Socialism has an absolute need of members with understanding and self-reliance. Even if we could conceive of a leader-ridden working class displacing the capitalist class from power such an immature class would be helpless to undertake the responsibilities of democratic socialist society. Socialism cannot be imposed from above.

The point was well put by Fredrick Engels, Marx's life long friend and co-worker for Socialism:

“The time is past for revolutions carried through by small minorities at the head of unconscious masses. When it gets to be a matter of complete transformation of social organisation, the masses themselves must participate, must understand what is at stake and why they are to act. That much the history of the last fifty years has taught us. But so that the masses may understand what is to be done, long and persistent work is required . . .”

(1895 Introduction to *Marx's Class Struggles in France, 1848-50*)

Clause 6: the parliamentary road

That as the machinery of government, including the armed forces of the nation, exists only to conserve the monopoly by the capitalist class of the wealth taken from the workers, the working class must organise consciously and politically for the conquest of the powers of government, national and local, in order that this machinery, including these forces, may be converted from an instrument of oppression into the agent of emancipation and the overthrow of privilege, aristocratic and plutocratic.

This Principle of the Socialist Party of Great Britain comes under attack from several directions; from those who deny that the machinery of government exists for the purpose stated; from those who deny the working class must organise “consciously and politically”; from those who deny that the working class can or should gain control of the existing machinery of government; and from those who deny that it can be converted from an instrument of oppression into the agent of emancipation.

The machinery of government consists of law making and law enforcement organisations, Parliament and local councils (and similar bodies in other countries), administrative and tax gathering departments, law courts, police and the armed forces and the whole network of governmental agencies.

Can it really be maintained that this machinery exists only to conserve the monopoly by the capitalist class of wealth taken from the workers? The critics argue that much governmental activity (for example education and the factory laws) does not appear to be concerned with the protection of capitalist property; that the worker as well as the capitalist can invoke the law's protection; and that the armed forces protect the whole nation, not merely the capitalists. These critics miss the point of the statement. It is not concerned with the multiplicity of functions incidentally carried on by governments but with the reason why the machinery of government, including the armed forces, *exists*. As has already been pointed out, it is the working class who produce the wealth and their labour that has built up the great accumulations of wealth represented in the means of production and distribution but they do not own the wealth produced or the means of production and distribution. A working class that produces but does not possess, is made possible by capitalist control of the machinery of government, including the armed forces.

The other functions carried out by governments arise out of the need to deal with problems thrown up by capitalism, and generally, to ensure that the system operates with as little disruption as possible.

The armed forces are there to back up the enforcement of capitalist laws, above all laws protecting property rights, and to protect British capitalism against encroachment and attack by foreign capitalist groups.

Next comes the reference to the need for the working class “to organise consciously and politically”. Particular significance attaches to the word “consciously”. It is of no use to organise politically if the basis and purpose of the political organisation, as in the Labour Party, is to try to run capitalism differently and to “improve” it with reforms. The political organisation required to achieve Socialism must be made up of people who understand thoroughly the object for which they are organising, and what Socialism means.

There are other critics who maintain that political organisation and action are not necessary or are actually harmful. They pin their hope on industrial organisation, either the existing trade unions or unions with some other structure. This is a vain hope. However well unions may operate in negotiating about wages and working conditions to protect the workers' standard of living they only function within the capitalist system. The great majority of trade unionists accept the continuance

of capitalism with its wage relationship between employers and employed; they do not understand and want Socialism. Consequently, while in their ordinary activities trade union members are in conflict with employers and periodically come into direct confrontation with the capitalist State, as non-socialists they continue to vote capitalist parties (including the Labour Party) into control of the machinery of government, a control that is then used by the government against the workers who put them in power.

Some of the criticism of political action is based on disillusionment with Labour governments. This does not show that the socialist argument for political action is wrong but only that it is futile to elect into power parties committed to perpetuating capitalism.

Some advocates of industrial action want general strikes in order to bring capitalism to a standstill, or want worker's councils to take over the factories etc. It is quite possible for large numbers of workers when their conditions are exceptionally harsh to be roused to press their claims for improvements by such action, but what then? Having created chaos or disrupted the normal process of capitalist production and sale (incidentally increasing thereby the hardships falling on the workers) what is the next step? Those who are in control of the machinery of government including the armed forces, have still to be dealt with. They may decide that they will "fight it out" at whatever cost; or make concessions sufficient to take the heat out of the movement; in either event it collapses. For let it not be forgotten, this is not a socialist working class demanding Socialism, but a predominantly non-socialist working class content to continue with capitalism provided that some especially galling feature is for the time being removed. The replacement of capitalism by Socialism does not even enter into the picture; workers who will not vote for Socialism certainly will not strike for it.

Then there are those who urge the workers to use physical force against the State power, fight the police and the armed forces, try to get soldiers to change sides, in short, seek power through civil war. This is the road to the blood bath. It can never in any circumstances lead to Socialism, which presupposes a predominantly socialist working class. The misguided people who advocate civil war only do so because they have despaired of winning over the working class, or are élitists who think that a non socialist working class can be led or dragooned into Socialism.

This brings us to the people who say that if the working class were socialist and voted socialist delegates into Parliament, etc., it would all be useless because the defenders of capitalism would then refuse to accept the new situation. These critics offer to give "evidence" to justify their case—evidence that is totally irrelevant. They quote events purporting to show that what they have in mind has happened already, but of course the requirements for the achievement of Socialism never have existed anywhere. There never has been a socialist working class, consciously and politically organised, unitedly demanding the end of capitalism and the establishment of Socialism.

When these pre-conditions for Socialism do exist, how could the capitalists hold it up? Socialists will predominate in the factories, the unions and throughout the organisation of production, distribution and communication, throughout government departments and local government, including the police and armed forces. How will those calling for the retention of capitalism make themselves effective? Without some considerable working class support the captains of industry and politicians will be generals without an army. We concede that there might be a minority of workers not yet fully convinced of the practicability of Socialism, or standing aside from politics, but to suppose that they will be willing or able to organise actively to resist by force the will of the great majority is not worth serious consideration.

Lastly there is the question of converting the instruments of oppression into the agents of emancipation. This is quite a simple issue. It is necessary for a socialist working class to gain political control, but only for the purpose of dispossessing the capitalist class and opening the way for the community as a whole to take the means of production and distribution and democratically

use them for the good of all. The State, with all its coercive machinery will be dismantled as its function—the custodian of private property—will have disappeared. New social institutions of administration based on the new social conditions will be democratically formed.

Clause 7: opposition to other political parties

That as all political parties are but the expression of class interests, and as the interest of the working class is diametrically opposed to the interests of all sections of the master class, the party seeking working class emancipation must be hostile to every other party.

This Clause prevents the Socialist Party of Great Britain or its members from belonging to or supporting other political parties in this country. Many people who think that in a general way they sympathise with our case find this hard to accept. They ask: Why will you not join up with other socialist parties? Why not support campaigns for reforms?

The chief reason why this Clause is included was that our objective is not the same as that of other parties claiming to be socialist whose aims are completely incompatible with ours. Socialism is not compatible with trying to administer capitalism or improve it with reforms. Nationalisation is of no use whatever to the working class and has nothing to do with Socialism. Even if the whole of the Labour Party programme was carried out it would leave capitalism intact and would not have brought Socialism nearer.

For the Socialist Party to work with non-socialist parties would create confusion and make it harder for the workers to understand the socialist case. What is needed is for each worker to make the crucial choice between capitalism and Socialism, to reject the one and support the other. For this the utmost clarity is required, not the confusion that would inevitably follow from associating with those who profess to support Socialism but who in their deeds are its enemies.

Clause 8: for a speedy end to capitalism

THE SOCIALIST PARTY of Great Britain, therefore, enters the field of political action determined to wage war against all other political parties, whether alleged labour or avowedly capitalist, and calls upon the members of the working class of this country to muster under its banner to the end that a speedy termination may be wrought to the system which deprives them of the fruits of their labour, and that poverty may give place to comfort, privilege to equality, and slavery to freedom.

The significance of this concluding Clause will have been made clear in all that has gone before. To the extent of its resources the Socialist Party of Great Britain tries to spread knowledge of the capitalist system and of the case for Socialism; and contest Parliamentary and local elections solely on the basis of the demand for the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of Socialism. Our work necessarily includes combating the propaganda not only of the openly capitalist parties Tories and Liberals, but also of the Labour Party and so-called “Left Wing” parties, which, while denouncing the Labour Party, tell the workers to vote it into power. We oppose the non-socialist aims of all these parties, also their support for war, and the suicidal policies of violence advocated by some of them.

Our message to the working class is that their immediate need is the speediest possible establishment of Socialism, by the democratic road outlined in these Principles.